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ABSTRACT

Asserting the need for social scientists and policymakers to acknowledge that there is no single, standard image of the family, this report describes the mandate of the Vanier Institute of the Family and examines family relationships, focusing on families in Canada. The report identifies several reasons for the emergence of the dual wage-earning family as normative both statistically and culturally. The report then asserts that scholars and policymakers need to identify what is common to different families in order to determine their rights and obligations to one another and community obligations to them. It is noted that assumptions about the nature of family influence government planning, personnel policies, pension plans, school procedures, and relationships within families. Descriptions of how families differ from one another lead to the suggestion that whether or not individuals constitute family cannot be decided on the basis of legal or biological relatedness. However, the report argues, family cannot be eliminated from policy analysis because a way of acknowledging bonds of obligation and affection that bind family members to one another would be lost. Further, the report asserts that as the difficulty in defining family is increasingly recognized, public policymakers are intent on invoking the notion of family; the current serious economic contraction reminds policymakers and scholars that families have always been economically significant and are based, in part, on economic interdependence. The report concludes by presenting the functional definition of the family used by the Vanier Institute, emphasizing what families do for the benefit of their individual members and the larger society. (KB)



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THE TIES THAT BIND

UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S FAMILIES:

WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE
WHAT THEY DO
HOW THEY FEEL

An Address To the

Advisory Committee of the Law Commission of Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
November 13, 1999

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When your President, Rod Macdonald, extended to me the invitation to speak with you today, he suggested that it might be reasonable and helpful if I were to begin by telling you something about the Vanier Institute of the Family. I believe that his suggestion was more than just a formality and courtesy. I think, instead, that what Rod hoped was that we might discover that there is a close parallel between the Vanier Institute's efforts to help renew our thinking about families and your own work to renew our thinking about the complex connections between personal, social, economic and governance relationships.

Briefly, and simply, the mandate of the Vanier Institute of the Family since its incorporation in 1965 has been to "promote the well-being of Canadian families.

As we pursue that broad and somewhat amorphous goal, the jobs we undertake include:

- the collection and consolidation of much primary research undertaken by others, especially that of Statistics Canada but

also that of many other researchers representing many disciplines;

-secondary analysis and interpretation of the research which serves as the foundation of our publications program, media relations, consultations with governments, and collaborations with other organizations;

-identification of issues and challenges embedded in trends of family formation and family functioning that we believe to be important to the lives and decisions of individual Canadians to be sure but which are also fundamental to the lives and decisions we frame as a larger community.

Our work begins with the so-called facts. We have more facts around our office "than you can shake a stick at." So as not to bore you with too many of the numbers, I have simply given you the 4017 facts about Canada's families that are contained in the our publication Canada's Families – They Count. And, now you that have the 'facts in hand' so to speak, I can simply draw on a few that illustrate how the very idea of family no longer seems to serve, as we once *thought* it did, as an obvious, certain, uniform and predictable foundation of both the private and public lives we establish and seek to sustain.

-Marriage is still quite popular in Canada – It is, in fact, so popular that quite a few Canadians marry two or three times;

-Although marriage is still popular, it is not nearly as popular as it was fifty years ago – Marriage rates are down, re-marriage rates subsequent to divorce and widowhood are down;

-Although marriage rates are down, the rate of coupling is as high as it ever was and Canadians enter into conjugal unions at about the same age as they did years ago when marriage was the only socially legitimated location of sexual intimacy. In fact, most marriages today simply serve to solemnize an already established conjugal union. And, of course, not all conjugal unions proceed to formalization through marriage as more and more Canadians, especially though not exclusively young Canadians, simply don't bother to seek the sanction of either church or state to sanctify the promises or commitments they make to one another. Instead, these promises and commitments are understood to be quite strictly personal promises and commitments assumed voluntarily by individuals without obligation to kin, faith, community or nation. And, right away, we begin to see a

quite crucial and perhaps contemporary distinction between marriage and family, two institutional foundations of society once thought to be joined at the hip. They are now distinct and it may, in fact, be marriage that is the institution in greater disarray.

-Close to one-third of children born in Canada today are born to women who are not married; in Quebec, the number is more than one out of every two. It is now quite clear that in Quebec at least, common-law unions are not simply a prelude to or trial period before marriage. Instead, they have been chosen as a preferred pattern of family formation, as an alternative to a marital union and as the chosen context within which to fashion a life with a partner and to bear and raise children. To be sure, the vast majority of children who are born to women who are not married are **not** born to single or lone-mothers. The vast majority of these children who are born to these 'unmarried' women leave the hospital and go home with

their two biological parents and, only in a formal legal sense, are they born out of 'wedlock.'

Before leaving the topic of marriage, we should acknowledge that marriages today, despite the intentions of brides and grooms, do not necessarily amount to promises 'til death do them part.' The best estimates available suggest that 37 of every 100 marriages entered into today are likely to end in divorce. Others will dissolve simply through separation and I would anticipate that separations will become increasingly common in the future (as they were in the past by the way) because those who are separated can now, without fear of social sanction, opt for a common-law relationship which does not require them to secure a divorce. And, finally, we do need to acknowledge that the divorce statistics no longer serve as an accurate measure of the number of conjugal unions that dissolve because they do not capture the break-up of common-law relationships given that only married people can, by definition, divorce. Even though

we are still tempted to collect information about marriages and divorces as though they were valid markers of the beginnings and ends of relationships, we know that intimate conjugal relationships now typically commence prior to a marriage (if one occurs at all) and that the end of intimacy bears little if any relationship to the formal divorce decree. Indeed, many of our assumptions about families were framed at a time in our history when only lawyers and accountants had 'partners.'

-It is, of course, the increased frequency of separation and divorce today (1951 – one divorce/24 marriages; now one divorce for every 2.4 marriages) that accounts for the significant increase in both the numbers and proportion of lone-parent families. Lone-parent families are, of course, not new to our society and our culture. Back in 1931, the proportion of lone-parent families was almost the same as it is today. However, in 1931 most were led by widows or widowers whereas today most lone-parents are separated or divorced (and most are mothers). Separation and

divorce obviously poses different challenges to individuals as they cope with the consequences of a voluntary decision rather than the fate of their spouse and, as you well know, separation and divorce pose significant challenges to the law as it pertains to corollary relief, child and spousal support, the division of property and, in general, as the law seeks to identify what individuals owe to one another over time by virtue of the promises they once made to one another.

Just to finish off this review of some of the facts, let me point to the emergence of the dual wage-earning family as now normative, both statistically and culturally:

- three-quarters of couples raising children now count on two wages to make ends meet;
- spouses are increasingly expected to assume roles as both providers or breadwinners and as providers of care and nurturance.

There is, as far as I can see, no reason to believe that the single wage-earning family typical of the immediate post-war years might rebound . Women (and men) are in the labour force to stay for at least five reasons that suggest that both individuals and the larger society are now dependent upon two wages per household.

1. The New Home Economics

First, there has been a dramatic change in the economics of the home. Over the past years, what was once called the "family wage" has all but disappeared. This idea, once strongly defended by the labour movement and the churches but now badly out of favour (because it is presumed to reinforce the financial and economic dependence of women upon men), was based on the assumption that the average industrial wage paid to male employees should be sufficient to support financially a rather large number of dependent children and a financially-dependent spouse whose primary responsibility was the care and upbringing of children. It was upon this assumption that men, for a restricted number of years, could assert that "No wife of mine will ever have to get a job." And, it was upon this foundation of the "family wage" that the gender roles associated with it emerged. But, the purchasing power of average male wages has declined significantly over the past twenty years and

families have done exactly what the economists would have expected; they have 'fielded' more labour. Accordingly, statistics reveal that the average purchasing power (in after-tax dollars) of Canadian families has deteriorated in recent years and this despite the fact that, over this same period of time, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of dual wage-earning families.

Obviously, the consequences of this trend toward dual wage-earning families as statistically normal and culturally normative for those families which cannot rely on two incomes are severe. Mothers who are lone-parents and their children are 4 to 5 times more likely to be poor than are families with two parents; six in ten female headed lone-parent families live below the poverty lines or officially-designated low-income cut-offs. The female lone-parent cannot, by definition, rely upon the financial contribution of a spouse, and, as well, suffers from the generally disadvantaged economic status of women, insufficient and/or defaulted upon support payments and a lack of vocational and training opportunities, job experience and often inadequate support for the care of her children. The income differential between one-parent and two-parent families has been growing dramatically.

2. Societal Ageing

Societal ageing will also impose pressure on all persons of so-called 'working age,' be they male or female, to participate in the labour market in order to help sustain the proportionately larger

costs associated with the income, health and social security of our older citizens.

3. Greed

In the context of modern economies that are addicted to growth in the rates of production and consumption, criticisms of today's adults as simply greedy in insisting on two wages per family are, although quite possibly correct, fundamentally misplaced. There is within the economies of modern industrial states a systemic need for individuals to increase their appetites as consumers. The purchasing power of families is regarded by economists as a major 'engine' of economic growth and development. Thus, the modern citizen is reminded, on a monthly basis, of the number of housing starts and the levels of consumer confidence because of the importance of such factors for the 'health' of the lumber industry, the automobile industry, the manufacturing and commercial sectors of the economy. In fact, contrary to the popular belief that stable families are the backbone of a strong economy, separation and divorce have been, for the past twenty years, a boon to the economy. They have become, after all, one of the main reasons for what economists call household formation. When two households replace one household, we will consume an extra sofa, living room suite, microwave oven and what have you - at least until remarriage creates from this consumption the inventory for garage sales. Indeed, from a strictly economic point of view, one would now have to fear the re-emergence of stable families and

the collapse of what has been labelled the 'divorce industry.'

4. Changing Values, Attitudes & Aspirations

Without doubt, the economic factors that have led to the commitment of women to the labour force have been complemented and reinforced by significant changes in the expectations and aspirations of men and women, especially those of young men and women. Attitude surveys and opinion polls reveal that our youth maintain, perhaps surprisingly, quite traditional values with regard to marriage and children. However, young women also indicate that they do not expect that their family commitments and child care responsibilities will necessarily occasion a significant interruption of their occupational careers. Furthermore, in what amounts to a 180 degree reversal of so-called traditional male attitudes, many young men indicate that they are not prepared to assume responsibility for a financially-dependent spouse over any prolonged period of time.

5. The State's Need for Tax Revenues

There is one further reason that I will cite that helps us to understand why both men and women must now commit themselves to the labour market. The modern state has, it seems, an ever-expanding appetite for tax dollars. Our Canadian system of taxation is based primarily upon the taxation of personal income in

contrast to other possible systems of taxation that could be based on wealth, consumption or production. As such, the state's need for an increasingly broad tax base is nothing more nor less than a need for more people with incomes to tax - a need, in short, for more employees. Not surprisingly, it is this particular fact, cynical though it may be, that proves more convincing than all the sociological, economic and ethical arguments one can muster when debating with those politicians, policy-makers and citizens who naively assume that the world would be a better place if women would just return to and stay in their kitchens. After all, it quickly becomes apparent to them that whatever problems they might have now paying down the national debt and balancing the books would pale in comparison to the shortfalls they would experience if they could not rely on the taxes collected from employed women. My own crude arithmetic indicates that roughly 25% of all taxes collected on the basis of employment-related income (including wages and salaries, commissions, unemployment insurance benefits, Canada and Quebec pension plan benefits, other pensions and superannuation, business income, professional income, commission income, farming income and fishing income) is paid by women to the federal and provincial governments and now exceeds 25 billion dollars per year.

While it is poverty and/or severe financial insecurity that confronts those with an insufficient attachment to the labour market, it is a "poverty of time" that affects the dual-earners such that, to borrow a

phrase from Dr. Mohr, today's families are most often "living on the left-overs of human time, energy and commitment and sharing their tiredness more than their liveliness." And, sure enough, Angus Reid's pollsters reported just a week ago that 54% of Torontonians would prefer a good night of sleep over a good night of sex.

Having reviewed some of the facts, I want now to return to the question of what families look like today. The question is important for two reasons. First, we need to acknowledge that there is no single, monolithic, uniform, standard image of family (once labeled by Dorothy Smith of OISE as the SNAF family – the Standard North American Family). There is no single portrait of the Canadian family but rather a gallery of diverse representations of families in which the members are bound together by ties of obligation and affection. Second, we need to try and find a way, even in the midst of such diversity, to identify what it is that is common to different families such that we might, with some confidence, know why it is we accord some groups of individuals recognition as families and thereby

determine their rights and obligations to one another as well as our obligations as a larger community to them.

It's not an easy task. Families differ one from another in terms of:

1. Their structure and membership, the attributes and capacities of their individual members and how they have come together;
2. The stage in the life of a family (from apartment to the starter home, the family home, the empty nest, the condominium, the retirement home);
3. Heritage of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious traditions;
4. Geographical location and patterns of extended kinship and community that surround a particular family; and,
5. How the family divvies up the work and responsibilities among its members (who brings home the bacon & who cleans the toilets).

In the absence of a Standard North American Family as a touchstone, many have claimed that family values are breaking down. Well what are family values? I know what my family values — and the list is probably pretty similar to the things your families value — things like nurturing, consideration, work, discipline, humour, responsibility, love. Moreover, Canadians - almost universally - tell us that it is their families that are more important to them than anything else in life, that family is becoming more important to them and they would, if they could, choose to spend more time with their families. Sure enough, when asked, most Canadians will declare that the institution of the family in Canada is in crisis. Curiously, the vast majority also report that their own families are doing quite well. They, it seems, are O.K. and, one would have to presume, the rest of us are not.

The lesson here is that we cannot any longer decide whether people are or are not family merely on the basis of what they look like or how their members are legally or biologically related to one another. As Judith Stacey has observed:

...contemporary family arrangements are diverse, fluid, and unresolved. Post-industrial social transformations have opened up such a diverse range of gender and kinship relationships as to undermine the claim in the memorable

opening line from Tolstoy's Anna Karenina: 'All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.' Today even happy families no longer are all alike! No longer is there a single culturally dominant family pattern to which the majority of Americans conform and most of the rest aspire.¹

It is this prospect that there can be no replacement for what Smith calls the Standard North American Family - that there is no new archetype or model of family formation and family functioning waiting in the wings - that is so unsettling, unsettling to citizens, social scientists who presume to help them understand the contours and context of their lives and to legislators, policy-makers and jurists who struggle to keep up with the changing face of families. This prospect is unsettling because as individuals, we are confronted by the existential responsibility to choose among alternatives and live with the consequences. It makes politicians and policy-makers uncomfortable because their jobs would be so much easier if the consequences of any policy or program would please all families equally. It is, in fact, more likely that any designated family policy or program will lead to a challenge before the courts or tribunals. And, last but not least, we who

¹ Judith Stacey (1991). Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America. New

identify ourselves as social scientists cannot continue with 'business as usual' confronted as we are by what Alain Touraine has characterised as the waning of the distinctly sociological image of human experience, an image predicated on notions of convergence to equilibrium and cultural standardisation as the normal consequence of modernisation.

Although it may be passé, according to the theorists of post-modernity, the sociological image of the family as an institution underscored by external pressures of law, custom, public opinion, group allegiances and the entanglements of property and commercial interest is embedded in the practices of daily living and in our institutions.

To illustrate how the taken-for-granted assumption about the family finds its place in the law, I would ask you to consider the case of *Brossard v. Quebec Commission des droits de la personne* ([1988] 2 S.C.R. 279) brought to my attention some years ago by Professor Mary-Jane Mossman. The case had to do with the validity of a policy adopted by a municipality which disqualified from employment with the town any members of the immediate families of full-time employees and town

York: Basic Books, p. 17.

councillors. It arose because the complainant had applied for summer employment as a lifeguard and had not been considered, pursuant to this anti-nepotism policy, for the position because her mother was employed as a typist at the police station. I'm not, in fact, at all interested in the actual decision in this case nor in the legal grounds for the decision which, not being a lawyer, I'm not even sure I understand. (The decision had to do largely with the statutory provisions under which municipalities claim justification for their policies and the status of municipalities as public employers).

Rather, what is most interesting is that this case was settled without any perceived need to identify who might be the "family" members ineligible for employment by virtue of such an anti-nepotism policy. Given the statistics about the high rates of marital dissolution, cohabitation, births out-of-wedlock, remarriage and so on, how would an employer know how to implement such a policy? Does family include only blood or marital relationships?

If, for example, the young woman who wanted to be a lifeguard had been the step-daughter of the woman employed at the police station, one

might argue that the policy applies by virtue of the new marital relationship between her father and his new wife. But, what if her father was not married again but simply living with his new partner? If two persons who lived in a same-sex couple with children wished to be employed by the municipality, should they be considered as family for the purposes of the application of the anti-nepotism policy? And, if the answer is yes, on what grounds could one refuse to acknowledge them as family when it comes to decisions about their entitlement to so-called "family benefits?" If two unrelated employees subsequently marry, must one of them be released from their position and how would one choose which one? These questions were not addressed because of the facts of the Brossard case but they are questions that point to the underlying, taken-for-granted, invisible image of family that finds its way into not only family law but into public policy generally. And, it is, I think, this invisible, taken-for-granted image of the family that is being challenged when the courts are required to consider the claims of same-sex couples, common-law spouses, grandparents and anyone else who would contest the fairness of the definitions of family embedded in statutes and regulations.

This kind of assumption affects such matters as government planning, employers' personnel policies, pension plans, the procedures of schools and other public institutions, and, of course, relationships within families. Who is considered a dependent for tax purposes? Who is allowed to visit a dying patient in a hospital? Into whose care is a school allowed to deliver a student who must be sent home on account of illness? Who belongs to "our" family: the live-in lover? the step-child of the common-law spouse? the former in-laws or grandparents?

Marriage, then, is, as Mme Justice McLaughlin has said, no longer an accurate marker or sign of commitment, of promises made and promises to keep.

And, although Statistics Canada collects information about people who live together under the same roof and we use these data to try to capture the lives of families, co-residence is not a sufficient marker of family any more than marriage is. Given the high rates of divorce and of either remarriage or re-coupling, modern step-families are made up of at least some members whose immediate family is not confined to the household in which they live. At least one child has a parent in another household

and the adults might also have children living elsewhere. It used to be that adults would ask each other about how many children they have. Today, it is more important to ask children how many parents they have because it does matter how many residences they occupy and whether there are people with different surnames who are authorised to act on their behalf. And, we confront these difficulties even before considering how the arrival of new reproductive technologies now requires us to distinguish between genetic, birth and social mothers and fathers.

According to Delia Ephron, the modern variation on the theme of the extended family today,

... includes your ex-husband or -wife, your ex's new mate, your new mate, possibly your new mate's ex, and any new mate that your new mate's ex has acquired. It consists entirely of people who are not related by blood, many of whom can't stand each other.²

It has been argued that the structural fragility of the modern (Oops! Excuse me! The post-modern family) is a consequence of the displacement of kinship as fundamental to societal ordering and institutionalisation by what Burgess a long time ago called

² Delia Ephron. Cited by Judith Stacey in Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America. New York, Basic Books, 1991, p. 61.

companionship. He argued that the family as institution would give way to the idea of family as the location of personal meaning to be found or constructed within voluntary relationships sustained by ties of affection and emotional gratification. Of course, the key word here is voluntary. These are relationships and commitments that are subject to re-definition, to re-negotiation. No longer can it be taken-for-granted that marriages would remain in tact for reasons of political alliance, material over-determination, threat of social ostracism or even love. As I think about the relative stability of marriages in the past which reflected more the fact that most people needed each other for survival than that they loved each other better and longer than we do, I am reminded that the Japanese actually have a term to account for the relative stability of their marriages. The word, gaman, means 'the patient endurance of the pains of marriage.'

I can see little evidence that would discredit the primary contention of the theorists of post-modernity. There is, indeed, no indication that we are simply in the midst of a transition from one dominant model of family formation and functioning to which all aspire to another. We are now familiar with the dilemmas that such diversity or family pluralism

poses. We know that it is no longer sufficient for the Department of Finance to tell us what the anticipated impact of a proposed budget will be on the family (i.e. the Standard North American Family of breadwinner husband, homemaker wife and their 1.8 children). But can we really expect them to tell us on budget day how the tax changes will impact on all the members of the post-divorce family that includes a mother living on social assistance in Toronto with her children who is looking for child care so that she can continue her community college studies (all of which is contingent upon federal and provincial negotiations under the Canada Health and Social Transfer and the Social Union Framework and Children's Agenda) as well as her former husband who just lost his job due to global restructuring, who was, even before that, always late with the child support payments and is now living with his new common-law partner and her children in Winnipeg?

And so, what is to be done?

It can be reasonably argued that it is time, confronted as we are now by the inevitability of a profound diversity in family patterns to discard the

notion of family entirely from the research and public policy process - to admit that it no longer has analytic utility and, as Eichler has pointed out, may well lead to discrimination and the violation of the interests of various individuals or groups of individuals. Instead, some would suggest that we must simply follow where liberal individualism (as an ontology, epistemology, political philosophy and research methodology) naturally leads - namely, to an exclusive emphasis on the individual and his or her circumstances. Thus, Jan Trost suggests we might better speak of the "dyadic relationships" between individuals while Scanzoni and Marsiglio offer their conception of the "primary group" as a "higher order construct" than that of family and invite us to explore the ties that bind us, as individuals, together in a sense of "we-ness."

Confronted by the dilemma of diversity, these suggestions do all have their appeal. Yet, as necessary as it may be to provide more disaggregated information about the individual members of families than we have been accustomed to, to do this and nothing else would, I fear be far from sufficient and ultimately unsatisfying (intellectually, pragmatically, and, dare I say it, emotionally). I would, after all, find myself working at the Vanier Institute of Dyadic Relationships charged

with the responsibility of promoting "we-ness" within our primary groupings.

What we risk sacrificing, it seems to me, if we respond to the dilemma of diversity with a thorough-going analytic individualism is an appreciation of how, by virtue of choice and/or circumstances, the vast majority of individuals are also wives, husbands and lovers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. They are embedded in these relationships in such a way that their interests as individuals cannot be known nor advanced unless we understand how these bonds of association are not simply derived but rather formative of character, aspiration, needs and interests. We can do our best to ensure that women are entitled to fair and equitable treatment before the courts and in the labour market but that formal equality will remain precisely that - formal - unless we also come to understand how the obligations that they carry as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters actually determine whether and how they will be able to invoke such claims to equality.

Similarly, after a number of organisations had success some years ago in convincing Canadians and their leaders that childhood poverty was a real

problem in Canada, it took us much time and effort to dispel the popular image of poor kids as atomised, abandoned street urchins trying to earn a buck with a squeegee in hand. What we had failed, as advocates, to convey in compelling terms was that poor children are the sons and daughters of poor mothers and fathers. And, almost unbelievably, this ungrounded sense of ourselves as individuals actually led to public policy recommendations that the federal government would ensure that no children were poor and it would be left up to the provinces to address the income security of their parents.

I guess what troubles me and what accounts for the fact that I don't feel particularly post-modern even though I know that "nostalgia ain't what it used to be" is that while we may no longer be able to speak about the family, we cannot, it seems, do without some conceptualisation of the familial no matter how difficult it may be to operationalise. For, without some way of acknowledging the bonds of obligation and affection that bind us to one another, we face the paradox of having created a successful, rigorous and scientifically reliable body of knowledge that, in the end, tells us precious little about the concerns that beckon us to it.

If we were to drop the word family from the lexicon of our scientific categories, we would wind up knowing much about the individual members of households but little about what it is that Canadians tell the pollsters is most important to them, namely their families.

We would struggle to understand how and why the conflict between work and family has emerged as one of the central issues and public policy preoccupations of the day and why that "struggle to juggle" jobs and family responsibilities has been, at least to date, experienced more by women than by men.

We do need to know, and I think we do now know better than we once did, about the respective contributions of male and female earnings to total family or household income. But, there is still merit in knowing about the incomes of families if for no other reason than to understand that the aggregate incomes of women have gone up dramatically in recent years, but for many, their economic circumstances have changed precious little in an economy in which average family incomes have been, to all intents and purposes, static for well over a decade. As individuals, we may now devote less time to our jobs than did our

ancestors in the last century, but, families are devoting considerably more time to the labour market in order to make ends meet.

Ironically, just as we begin to recognise how it is becoming increasingly difficult and complex to know about families per se because they can no longer simply be defined by reference to marriage, or biological relationships or uniform patterns of dependency and inter-dependency, public policy makers seem intent on invoking the notion of family more and more.

For example, recent proposals for income security reform would suggest that individual entitlements may increasingly be displaced by benefits awarded and calculated on the basis of family incomes

Similarly, after years of relative neglect, the modern state has begun to rediscover the family as a potential agent of health promotion, provider of care for the aged, sick and disabled, as the principal loci of attitudinal and behavioural change and as the first source of economic and financial support for its members. It's as though we're beginning to realise that if ever there was a time that we needed family, it's now. And, in the

meantime, families have been trudging along quietly, doing what families do - changing, adapting and muddling along as they attempt to renew themselves, provide for their members, educate and socialise, call upon tradition in meeting the future and sustain bonds of affection.

It is not merely coincidental that the significance of family is being recalled at a time when industrial economies throughout the western world have been experiencing serious contraction and we face an increasingly competitive international economic order and when employment or jobs no longer seem to provide us with the sense of security we thought we could expect. Until quite recently, we had allowed ourselves to believe that the 'modern' family had evolved into a specialised unit of emotional and psychological commitment sustained principally by love and affection. We naively forgot that families have always been and are still economically significant. The relationships of men and women have always been based, in part, on economic interdependence and too often on dependence and exploitation. As two wages become increasingly required to sustain a family, this relationship becomes more obvious but it was always there. For example, child care, whether it is done for wages or apparently for free is an economically

productive and vital form of work that sustains a society. We are kidding ourselves if we think we can get out of the present 'child care crisis' cheaply. You can pay men enough to support economically productive but financially dependent wives to care for children, or you can pay women enough to support househusbands (I have no particular preference) or you can pay friends, relatives or professionals to care of children but, as a society, we cannot escape from the necessity of this most vital investment.

Regrettably, there is all too often a romanticised and unrealistic image of the family that permeates these suggestions that it is the family that will deliver us from the contradictions of the modern welfare state by picking up the pieces and doing again, apparently for free, what families used to do thirty or forty years ago. Who, one must ask, is at home any longer to care for the sick and the old? When 50% of the population changes residence once every five years such that we have actually come to believe that a phone call is the next best thing to being there, how can we provide any genuine support to the dispersed members of our families and communities?

We may, indeed, be tempted to respond to what Glen Elder Jr. characterised some years ago as the "discovery of complexity in family relations" by simply throwing up our hands and choosing to seek knowledge about individuals and the relationships they establish between themselves. But, the cost may be great. When this kind of methodological individualism takes the place of what, for lack of a better term at this time, I will call associative analysis, we cannot prevent the blaming of victims. Poor individuals will be held accountable for their circumstances. Domestic violence will be attributed simply and simplistically to personal attributes. Individuals will struggle to cope with a sense of personal responsibility and guilt as they find it almost impossible to manage the competing demands of domestic responsibilities, occupation and civic obligation.

As Charles Taylor has suggested, we cannot seek to comprehend our circumstances as though human meaning is a property of individual subjects.

With both positive and negative consequences - that is for better or worse - it is our families - whatever form they take - that represent the

pre-eminent universe of (intersubjective) meaning through which "we" encounter and constitute the world.

Or, as John Dewey observed, we need to recognise an 'enveloping world' beyond ourselves" and come to appreciate that "our accomplishments, however great, are not ours alone." Families represent the pre-eminent world that envelops us but most especially it is the world that introduces to the child (while it reminds us as adults) of what de Tocqueville called the 'habits of the heart.'

Families are optimally and potentially the crucibles of reciprocity, trust, discipline, self-restraint and responsibility. They are the architects of character and social life. It is within our families that our children learn to learn, and do not just grow **up** but grow **into** their socio-historical milieu and into the institutions and traditions that make democracy and a civil society possible. For these reasons and not just because families take care of the dependent young and old so that the rest of us don't have to pay for them, we all do have a stake in the well-being of families whatever they look like. Figuring out how the "we" who have a stake in families can best take up our responsibilities – through the instruments of

membership in a larger human community and where we learn to govern ourselves by moral concerns, to make commitments, and to fulfil obligations. We count on families both as individuals and as a society to lead people to make choices not only in terms of their individual interests but how to evaluate what our interests are and how to choose among various options. It is within our families (necessarily surrounded by and ideally supported by communities) that we become citizens, people with personal identities to be sure but people with commitments to the public good, the common wealth. In the absence of such commitments, we are left with nothing more than the invisible hand of self-interest or the coercive force of governments and the sanctions of law. Neither the marketplace nor the state has an essential interest in the ties that bind us together as people. And yet, both the market and the state can function democratically only to the extent that they can take such ties that bind for granted as the only protection against a culture of mistrust, resentment, fear, cynicism, corrosive individualism, privacy, isolation and greed. Ideally, families prepare us to be socially responsible adults who can and will act on the basis of what's right and what's wrong, even without recourse to the law.

the state or on the basis of our voluntary associations and mediating institutions —is one of the “small” challenges I understand you, as a group, have accepted. (And, I do admire your courage and wish you much luck).

There is much talk these days of a renewed role for communities as a necessary complement or restraint on the self-interest of the marketplace and the anonymity of the state. And, although many look to a revitalized civic society in response to the contraction of the welfare state, most simply assume that citizens are equipped and prepared to make the necessary investment of time and energy that would be required to re-vitalize our communities. However, we cannot simply flip a switch to turn on a “thousand points of (civic) light.” Instead, we will have to make an investment in rebuilding the foundations of the lives we live together in our homes, in our communities and in our nation.

It is naïve to believe that we might revitalise our communities and renew our civic sentiments without investments in our families. They are, after all, the places where we all (children and adults alike) grow into our

The Vanier Institute has, for many years, been guided by a definition of the family that emphasises what families do, to the benefit of their individual members and to the benefit of the larger society. As such, we have employed a definition that is essentially functional and inclusive, a definition that directs our gaze toward the work and accomplishments of people who commit themselves to one another. It is a definition that acknowledges and respects heterosexual or same-sex couples, lone-parent families, extended patterns of kinship, step-families and blended families, couples with children and those without, the commitments of siblings one to another, and the obligations and affection that unite the young and the old as they weave their biographies together. We speak of and try to understand how people provide for and care for one another, how they teach and discipline, how they are financially, economically, psychologically and emotionally dependent upon one another and, last but not least, how they express their love for one another.

This kind of functional definition is, as you well know, difficult to operationalise. It is by no means as straight-forward as it was when all we thought we needed to know was whether a man and a woman were married which served as an indication (not always correctly) that these

familial obligations would be fulfilled. As such, our functional definition does, I fear, put us, along with Mme Justice L'Heroux Dube, firmly in the camp of seriously "muddled thinkers" which is how she was editorially characterised in the Southam newspapers recently by a professor of religion.

Muddled or not, there is today no other realistic option than to proceed with the search for a foundation of law, policy, and practice in the commitments that people make to one another in the fashion that they do so. There is no other option than to try to understand the ties that bind us to one another in the lives that we live together.